

The Everlasting Covenant

Genesis 17:1-8

I enjoyed a documentary I watched this week regarding the year 1989. It was a year that changed history, to be sure. I was amused by those asking the question then, “What is the internet?”, a question I myself remember asking a friend who knew more than I did about those computers we were all starting to use. It was also the year the first Global Positioning Satellite was launched into space, what we now simply call GPS. 1989 was the year in which the Berlin Wall came down, representing the demise of the Soviet Union. All of that seems just a few years ago, with the memory of my own adult life. Just 35 years ago. Yet so much has changed. Thirty five years is a long period of time.

In Genesis 17, we have another passage of time. Twenty four long years have passed since God told Abram to leave home and to head for the land which God would show him. Indeed, thirteen years have passed since Ishmael’s birth of chapter 16. Ishmael, now a teenager, was the only seed Abraham possessed. Abraham himself is 99 years old. The age for having children is past. Perhaps he and Sarah had given up hope of ever having a child together.

But God’s promise must have remained in his heart, a promise he believed by faith. We remember that promise from,

Gen. 15:4 “And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.”

Eliezer wouldn’t be Abraham’s heir. Neither would Ishmael. But a son would come from his own body. A legitimate son born to him and Sarah. And Abraham could not have forgotten the

assurance of the covenant which was established by God in the ceremony we studied in chapter 15. That ceremony confirmed to Abraham the truthfulness of God’s words, his faithfulness to keep his promise. But 24 years is a long time to wait.

So we come to chapter 17, and still we have no son for Abraham and Sarah. But we do have further instructions regarding the covenant. God is surely testing and building this man’s faith. And he does so as declaration of his own authority.

I. GOD ASSERTS HIS SOVEREIGN AUTHORITY OVER HIS PEOPLE.

v.1-2

Now, I want you to realize that God is not entering into a second covenant with Abraham, but reinforcing that same covenant established in Chapter 15. I will spend no time at all refuting the foolish arguments of those who don’t believe that the Bible is true, for they say that chapter 15 and chapter 17 are written by two different authors from two entirely different perspectives. That’s nonsense. Both are written by Moses, under the inspiration of God. And both describe the same covenant. The covenant of grace.

God is renewing the covenant relationship previously established. He speaks to Abraham to whom he is already bound himself in covenant. Thus, these words are not words defining how Abraham should ENTER a covenant with God, but rather how he was supposed to live once that covenant has been established.

There is great practical lesson in this for us today, namely the understanding of the relationship between faith and good works. Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as

righteousness. We read that in Chapter 15. In our language, he was saved by grace through faith.

But having been saved by grace through faith, having entered into this covenant of grace, and having been assured by God that God alone would provide the sacrifice of justice for breaking the covenant represented by those animals cut in two, Abraham was called to live a life of obedience to his God. Saved by faith, he was called to live in obedience. Just like we are.

In this appearance to Abraham, God asserts his sovereign authority. Notice first how God reveals himself to Abraham,
v.1 “I am Almighty God.”

That’s about as good an English translation as you can get. The Hebrew words are “El Shaddai,” a name of God popularized by a Michael Card song. El means God. And Shaddai means powerful, all-powerful, omnipotent. Almighty.

It is a name of power, a name of glory. Perhaps of all God’s names in Scripture, this one is the most powerful. How I cringe whenever I hear this particular name of God used in vain, for that is so offensive because of what this name means and represents. God Almighty. God all powerful!

A. God identifies himself by revealing his power to his people.

We shouldn’t pass over this introduction, for in our day, the perception of God as El Shaddai is not very popular. In our age, we don’t like the demonstration of authority. We don’t like names that describe or even imply authority. We chafe under the exercise of power, for we live in an egalitarian age, that is, one in which we wish to see everyone as equals. Even God.

But God is not our equal. He is not our buddy. He’s not one of us. He is God Almighty! God of Power. El Shaddai. Thus we must view God and perceive of him in this way, for only then can we appropriately hear what he has to say. And God Almighty has plenty to say. What he says to Abraham is perfectly clear.

v.1 “Walk before me and be blameless.”

God tells Abraham what he is supposed to do, and how he is supposed to live. That’s called authority. With such a declaration of sovereign authority,

B. God imposes his will upon his people.

“Walk before me.” Walk in my presence. Live your life under the constant and ever-present observation and supervision of God Almighty. “And be blameless.”

That word “blameless” could be translated ‘perfect,’ as it is in the King James. And having said that, let me explain what it means. It means completeness, wholeness, soundness, uprightness. Blameless is a good translation. Or mature. It does not mean that Abraham lived a perfect life, but nonetheless God did call him to live such a life. Anything short of that perfection constituted a violation of the covenant.

Thus, if this weren’t a covenant of grace, wherein God himself paid the penalty of covenant breaking by pouring out his wrath upon Jesus, his only son, if that weren’t true, then this would be a most oppressive command. If God were saying to Abraham, “Walk before me and be blameless in order to earn your salvation or to work in order to obtain my acceptance,” then Abraham would have been under a most horrible curse.

But God was saying no such thing. Just as he declared the

ten commandments of his law on Mt. Sinai to the people of Israel whom he had already redeemed and saved by grace, so he declares his will upon Abraham who was already secure in the position of God's beloved child. So it is with everyone one of us in Jesus Christ.

But the fact that a man is saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone does not diminish God's demands upon his life. And so this command comes to you just as directly as it came to Abraham. "Walk before God and be blameless."

When you walk before the Lord, there is no room for proud self-righteousness, that which the Pharisees so clearly demonstrated in Jesus' day. Nor is there any room for the arrogant sense that you actually reach absolute perfection. But knowing that you fall short of the glory of God, knowing that you sin, and knowing that the penalty for your sins has already been paid by Jesus Christ upon the cross, knowing all those things, listen to God's demands upon your life. Hear his will which he imposes upon you. As one who is saved by grace, he calls you to "walk before him and be blameless."

He speaks that command in the context of grace.
v.2

To repeat what has been emphasized so often before,

C. God graciously enters into relationship with his people.

God is graciously confirming a covenant that already established, a covenant which was enacted when God Almighty walked between the pieces of those animals cut in two, accepting upon himself the curse of the covenant represented by those dead animals cut in two. Indeed, in Jesus Christ, God the son,

the second person of the trinity, was cut in two. His body was given as a sacrifice for your sins and his blood was poured out as the blood of the new covenant.

But none of that diminishes the declaration of God's sovereign authority. So how should we respond? There is no better example than Abraham.

v.3a "Abram fell on his face."

In general terms,

II. GOD'S PEOPLE MUST RESPOND TO HIS SOVEREIGN AUTHORITY WITH HUMBLE REVERENCE.

Abram fell facedown. If anything is missing today from the common conception of God, it is this sense of God's power and authority made so obvious by Abraham's reaction. I've called that reaction humble reverence. It's not hard to describe or understand. He fell on his face. That's humility, an expression of humility. A sense of lowliness and subordination. A sense of creaturely-ness when confronted with the presence of the creator. It is a demonstration of reverence.

People of God, what is so often missing today, even in Christian circles, is such humble reverence before God. We are much too concerned with our own pleasure and our own comfort, our own interests and desires. Abraham, when confronted by God's presence, had no such thoughts of himself.

We are much too focused on celebration and entertainment, on our own satisfaction and fulfillment of our own needs. We are too little focused on the infinite contrast between God's holiness and our horrible sinfulness. And when we do come to face our own sinfulness, we fail to realize the unmeasurable value of grace.

Often, we're too interested in entertainment even to think about what the worship of God really involves. We approach God with a casual appearance and a casual heart. We are unprepared even to enter the sanctuary to worship. And when we do enter, we think of everything else that lies ahead of us on this sabbath day. How little do we really think of him as God Almighty, El Shaddai. How little do we think about him when we give in so easily to sin, whether in thought or action.

Abram fell facedown. I can't remember the last time when I was so overwhelmed with a sense of God's power and glory and sovereign authority that I was compelled to prostrate myself on the ground! We ought to know such an experience of God's presence. Moses did.

Exod. 3:2 "And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed. 3 Then Moses said, "I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn." 4 So when the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then He said, "Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground." 6 Moreover He said, "I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God."

People of God, let those words have impact upon your hear. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing, this place, is holy ground. And it is holy because it is here that we have assembled to meet with God. Take off your sandals. Fall down on your face. And meet with God.

Don't let your mind think about what you'll be eating for lunch,

or even about all of those things that have so troubled you this week. Think of God, for you are in his presence. You are in the Holy of Holies, behind the inner curtain, offering your sacrifices to God Almighty, El Shaddai. As much as humanly possible, with God's help, shut out everything else from your mind this morning as you worship. Everything else but God's infinite power and glory. And do so with humility.

A. God's sovereign authority compels us to accept of position of humility.

The symbolism is dramatic. The meaning is clear. The outward position clearly reflects the attitude of the heart.

How often do you actually practice such humility? The significance of this is not so much in the outward action but on the compelling attitude of the heart, though praying on your knees isn't a bad idea. We ought not to be too casual with God, and our outward actions should reflect deep humility and deep reverence.

B. God's sovereign authority compels us to embrace an attitude of reverence.

Reverence is what is missing from much of what is labelled "worship" today, the reverence of granting honor to God merely for the privilege of being in his presence.

We have boldness, yes. And confidence, yes. Scripture encourages us in both those ways. But never let your bold confidence hinder your expression of reverence. When God speaks, as he does every time his word is read, then we must hear with absolute reverence. When God spoke to Abram, he fell upon his face.

My friends, if God were to pour out his Spirit in revival upon this community and upon our church, as we will be praying this week in a day of prayer and fasting called by the session, I know

what we could expect. People would be overcome by the sense of God's glory and power, and they would fall upon their faces before him. In silence. In adoration. In repentance. In worship.

When God appeared to Abram, Abram could do nothing else.

I can't manipulate you in order to bring this about. I can't give an altar call and invite you to come forward and lie on the ground. I can't give you instructions on exactly what you need to do. I can only proclaim to the infinite, eternal and unchangeable glory of God and pray that you become aware of the infinite, eternal and unchangeable glory of his presence.

Now God is ready to speak. God is ready to speak when his people fall facedown before him. And in speaking to Abraham,

III. GOD DEFINES AN EVERLASTING COVENANT WITH HIS PEOPLE.

It seems that each chapter of Genesis gives us increasing understanding of the nature of this marvelous covenant of grace. In verse 3, when Abram fell on his face,

v.3 "...God talked with him, saying: 4 "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations."

It would be an everlasting covenant.

v.7

And the promise of the covenant would be granted as an everlasting promise.

v.8

Ultimately, and most simply, the statement of the covenant of grace is this: "I will be your God and you will be my people." We see that statement so clearly in,

v.7

Now, don't forget where we began. God sovereignly determines all the stipulations of this covenant. God defines all the terms. And we learn a great deal about his definition of the covenant in these verses. First,

A. The covenant extends to many nations.

v.2 "[I] will multiply you exceedingly."

Well, that's pretty general. Precisely how he will do that is specified in,

v.4-6

The covenant with Abraham included many nations! It is crucial to recognize this, for God's covenant with his people was never restricted to one nation, not even in the OT. God's covenant was never designed as merely a Jewish covenant. And therefore, when the Old Covenant becomes the New Covenant, we can accurately say that they are both different administrations of the very same covenant.

God's covenant of grace was always designed to include his people from all the nations of the world. Right from the outset. Abraham would be the father of many nations. Indeed, he is our father!

Gal. 3:6 "...just as Abraham "believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." 7 Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." 9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham."

He is the heir of the whole world.

Rom. 4:13 “For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.”

Even Abraham’s very name would represent this universal extension of the covenant. Now, I admit that I’ve been a bit careless at times in previous sermons, using the more common name Abraham, though until verse 5 of chapter 17, his name was actually Abram. Abram means exalted father, probably an honorable description of Abraham but very possibly a description of God as the exalted father. But the new name God gives him is so very similar, and clearly emphasizes that he will be the father of many nations. Abraham means father of a multitude.

A multitude that extends to many nations. Every nation. And to us. Plain as day, we are the children of Abraham. We are the descendants of Abraham with whom God made a covenant in Genesis 12-17. In that regard also,

B. The covenant extends to succeeding generations.

This is so important, I just want to stop and make you understand. It is so relevant to our church today, and to our children. It is the determining principle for understanding the practice of infant baptism, and the proper place of our children in the membership of the church.

We call our baptized children covenant children. We identified them as non-communicant members of the church. That is, before they exhibit faith and repentance before the Session, they are kept from the Lord’s Supper. They are non-communicants. But they are members! They belong to the church, and by God’s grace and by God’s covenant promise, we include them as Christ’s children and teach them from their mother’s breast about

the love of Jesus Christ shown upon the cross.

The point is that when God made a covenant with us, he made that covenant with our descendants also, our succeeding generations. God has made a covenant with our children, even those not yet born. And our grandchildren. And our great-grandchildren, and great-great grandchildren. To a thousand generations!

When God gave the law at Mt. Sinai, he used these words of his promise,

Exod. 20:44 “You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; 5 you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, 6 but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”

And that was confirmed in,

Deut. 7:9 “Therefore know that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments.”

And we read in,

1Chr. 16:15 “Remember His covenant forever, The word which He commanded, for a thousand generations, 16 The covenant which He made with Abraham, And His oath to Isaac, 17 And confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, To Israel for an everlasting covenant.”

The covenant extends to succeeding generations, which as

we'll see next week, is precisely why the sign of the covenant is to be placed upon our children. But this morning, we'll stop at this point, that succeeding generations are always included when God makes a covenant.

Look at it here,

v.7

v.8

"You and your descendants." We should ask, how does that can transferred into the New Testament?

Acts 2:38 Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

Those who are far off are the generations who are yet to come, far off into the future. The same meaning is rather clear in,

Deut. 29:9 Therefore keep the words of this covenant, and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do. 10 "All of you stand today before the LORD your God: your leaders and your tribes and your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel, 11 your little ones and your wives—also the stranger who is in your camp, from the one who cuts your wood to the one who draws your water— 12 that you may enter into covenant with the LORD your God, and into His oath, which the LORD your God makes with you today, 13 that He may establish you today as a people for Himself, and that He may be God to you, just as He has spoken to you, and just as He has sworn to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 14 "I make this covenant and this oath, not with you alone, 15 but with him who stands here with us today before the LORD our God, as well as with him who is not here with us today."

Those who are not here are the generations yet to come. And finally,

C. The covenant extends to everlasting ages.

v.7

v.8 "an everlasting possession..."

God's covenant is not temporary. It did not end with the coming of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem. It will not be restored in a future millennium, because it has never ceased. The covenant established in Genesis 15, renewed and explained in Genesis 17, is still in effect. And our relationship with God is defined by it.

And so it will be throughout the ages, to everlasting ages, to the end of the age, to the end of time as we know it, ushering us into our eternal glory in the new heavens and the new earth. It is an everlasting covenant.

It is under the provisions of this covenant that you and I are saved, for in this covenant God declares himself to be our God and accepts us as his children. You must receive that gift as an act of faith, and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as the atoning sacrifice for your sins.

And with that promise which I joyfully proclaim to you today, fall facedown before God. Fall on your face before El Shaddai, God Almighty. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." And listen to your God, who says to each one of you as he spoke to Abraham, "I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless."